

There is no image of language

Language, Culture and Content

Aiming for Socialism with South African Characteristics has to mean that South African things are important to South Africans.

This includes all of their languages. But further than that, it means that each language is recognised as a bearer of culture, and that similarly, all the South African languages expand to embrace the content of our joint South African reality.

Each language is a medium, and languages as such are media with special characteristics. To illustrate the special character of language as a cultural medium, consider that it appears to be impossible to illustrate with a graphic image, what “South African Characteristics” might be.

Hence, although in all of these interactions there is one, and occasionally more than one, image used to epitomise what is being discussed, yet on this occasion it proves not to be possible to find such an image. Nor will a touristic combination of many images help. Nor will a slogan like “unity in diversity”.

Nothing can compare with a language in the sense of it being a single body, but capable of expressing everything that it needs to express. If it is not capable, then it can borrow or invent new ways, while still continuing to be its unique self as a language.

“In the beginning was the Word”: Human beings are distinguished from other animals by their possession of language. It is language that allows humans to possess a collective consciousness that can create, and continue to create itself.

Kenya's Independent School Movement (extract)

James Stanfield, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Economic Affairs, June 2005

Following a ban on female circumcision by three missionary societies in 1929, the Kikuyu in Central Province began to boycott mission schools and demanded an end to the monopoly on education held by the missions. After failing to persuade the government to open its own secular schools free from missionary control, the Kikuyu began to open their own. During the early 1930s extensive fundraising activities therefore took place, school buildings were erected and self help groups formed.

Each independent school was governed by a local committee, responsible for the recruitment and payment of teachers, the setting of school fees and other fundraising events. As independent schools became established joint meetings were organised and at a gathering in August 1934 the Kikuyu Independent Schools Association (KISA) was set up. While KISA emphasised the need to negotiate with the colonial authorities some independent schools wanted to remain entirely free from direct European influence. A rival association, the Kikuyu Karing'a Education Association (KKEA), was therefore established soon after.

By 1939 there were 63 Kikuyu independent schools educating a total of 12,964 pupils.

To help meet the increasing demand for trained teachers both KISA and KKEA agreed to support the opening, in 1939, of Kenya's first teacher training college at Githunguri, the site of the Kikuyu's first independent school. Originally intended to train teachers, the College soon included an elementary, primary and secondary school, with enrolments increasing to over 1,000 by 1947. It was this independent school/college which Jomo Kenyatta would later become the principle of, providing a base for his future campaign for Presidency. The rest of course is history.

A police investigation of Mau Mau early in 1952 sealed the fate of the independent schools. When the government declared a state of emergency later that year, both KISA and KKEA schools were closed.

From: <http://egwestcentre.com/2005/06/13/kenyas-forgotten-independent-school-movement/>

The above account of the Kikuyu Independent Schools poses them as a reaction, not immediately against colonialism, but to the missionaries' banning of female circumcision (genital mutilation), a practice that has few open defenders today, (although male genital mutilation is having a come-back in the guise of being a prophylactic against HIV and AIDS).

But in fact these schools were part of the resistance to colonialism, and part of a cultural/political movement that helped to preserve the whole Kikuyu culture, quite apart from the question of female circumcision. No doubt they contributed to the health of the language, which is the language in which Ngugi wa Thiong'o continues to write, today.

In the last part of the Course we will use a piece of Ngugi's writing

How to learn languages?

In African countries, and notably in South Africa, people commonly speak many languages, but very little language-teaching is taking place. So, how are people managing to learn so many languages?

It would appear that informal methods of propagating language-learning are far more efficient than the formal ones, at least to the level of conversation, and oral commerce.

The CU is based on a theory of teaching and learning (in fact, on a pedagogy of the oppressed) in which dialogue is the source of learning, the practice and the method. We see no reason why languages should not also be taught and learned in this same fashion. Collective groups or study circles can be used for language, so that language is learned socially.

- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).
-



Logo of the 10th Language and Development Conference

Language in School

The institution of 11 “official” languages in South Africa, sanctified by the Constitution, is as far as we know based on “human rights” precepts. Consequently, because human rights are passive, what has been done so far has not been very effective in terms of bringing the languages to life.

The teaching of children in the mother-tongue that they have from home, when they enter school for the first time, may be a human right. But if so, then it is not yet being well observed in South Africa. Motivation for change in this regard comes not from “human rights” but from the relatively poor rate of success in attempting to educate people in languages (English or Afrikaans) that they did not learn in the home and therefore do not, in the beginning, know.

Imposing on young children the stress of attempting, at a very young age, to learn in language that they do not understand and have not yet been taught, is a cruelty and of course, it is not successful. On average, children who are presented with this hurdle, do not advance as fast as children who are welcomed into the formal education system in their own language.

Teaching of children first in their mother-tongue, and then teaching them English, using their mother tongue, with this transition taking place over several years of schooling, is now a political demand.

The above paragraphs are taken from our Communist University course on Education. They state the continuing problem sufficiently well for our purposes.

Those paragraphs were written prior to the 10th Language and Development Conference held in Cape Town in mid-October, 2013, where the Minister of Basic Education announced that:

*“South Africa has embarked on an **Incremental Introduction of African languages (IIAL)** policy. The IIAL policy will be implemented incrementally commencing in Grade 1 in 2015 and will continue until 2026 when it will be implemented in Grade 12.”*

This quotation is from the Minister’s speech to that conference, published prior to the event and included in the document attached, and downloadable below.

The document also includes remarks about the IIAL by Dr Jennifer Joshua, and remarks about Kiswahili as a *lingua franca*, by Dr Nancy Kahaviza Ayodi.

The literature on this topic is limited, and probably exists mostly within the academies. Our course must go with what we have got. The next time we run this course, we will have another look for original documents. But we have enough in front of us, on language in school, to allow us to have a good discussion.

It is apparent from this and from the earlier Part 7 about the legislation of the Use of Official Languages Act of 2012, that government has committed to considerable funding and employment in the area of languages. What is less clear is the ideological or other kind of motivation that is behind this commitment. The practical need is clear, but there are other, more subjective ideas involved, and these are what we would want to unpack in the future.

Because, as we have already seen, manifest need, good intentions, legislation and resources may all be present but they may add up to very little in the real world, if the politics of the whole thing do not correspond. Everything finally depends, as always, on the action of the masses.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [10th Language and Development Conference Programme.](#)



Once more on the Politics of Language

This course was not to teach language. It was to examine and to problematise the politics of language in South Africa.

We have seen that whereas the Constitution enshrines 11 official languages and instructs governments to take care of any others that may be used by South Africans; and whereas institutions have been created for that purpose; yet the 11 languages are not getting equal attention. The weaker ones are getting less attention and the stronger ones are getting more resources.

The net result is that the indigenous South African languages are not being preserved. Instead, the former colonial languages are being preserved.

When we look at the whole continent of Africa, we see that the same tendency for the strengthening of the former colonial or exogenous languages (French, Portuguese, Arabic and English) and the relative decline of African languages, with the exception of Kiswahili, is continuing.

For the purpose of constructing a Pan-African political culture, we are obliged to use these few languages, but South Africans are not learning them - as a rule - with the exception of English.

South Africans will be obliged to develop the learning of French, Portuguese and Arabic, in the first place, and then move to the learning other African countries' indigenous languages, starting with Kiswahili, if our country is going to play its full

part in the anti-Imperialist unity-in-action of the Continent of Africa, as envisaged by the late Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah.

Consequences

Consequences of the neglect of languages, internally and externally will be that politics are limited. The ideas of politics will be expressed in few languages, most likely the exogenous ones, and any migration to politics will have to mean migration away from indigenous language.

Such a migration will set up a contradiction between the politics of liberation on the one hand, and our South African characteristics on the other. Whereas we already know that liberation must embrace South African characteristics if it is to be a real liberation.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [The Writer in a Neo-colonial State, 1993, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, extract](#)
-

Course: Languages

26005, Introductions to Parts 9 and 10

1566 words